

Gromyko: Intriguing Questions

As Western governments look at the rubble of East-West relations they are forced to ponder these intriguing questions: What is the role of Foreign Minister Andrei A. Gromyko? And is he, with his enormous experience, a potential conduit of understanding or is he a major part of the problem?

Unfortunately, the observable facts appear to support negative answers to such questions.

Westerners like to think that U.S.-Soviet relations will improve as more members of the Soviet power structure become sophisticated through exposure to the outside world. If this thesis is correct, Gromyko should be our kind of Soviet bureaucrat. After all, the man has been in more or less constant contact with the West since 1939, when he became head of the American department of the foreign ministry. He has since been ambassador to Washington, to the Court of St. James and to the U.N. Security Council. He sat behind Josef Stalin at the World War II conferences in Tehran, Yalta and Potsdam.

Gromyko became foreign minister in 1957, when John Foster Dulles was President Dwight D. Eisenhower's secretary of state. Since that time the U.S. State Department has gone through eight bosses: Christian A. Herter, Dean Rusk, William P. Rogers, Henry A. Kissinger, Cyrus R. Vance, Edmund S. Muskie, Alexander M. Haig Jr. and George P. Shultz. But the 75-year-old Gromyko is still running the Soviet foreign ministry.

Through most of those years Gromyko was strictly a hired hand. Nikita S. Khrushchev put it cruelly: "If I tell Gromyko to take down his pants and sit on a block of ice, he will do so until I tell him to get up." The foreign minister himself once told a Western newsman, "I'm not interested in my

personality. I'm only an executor; the Politburo decides what I do."

Lately, however, things seem to have changed; the Soviet Union's consummate bureaucrat has come into his own.

Outsiders are always at a disadvantage in trying to fathom what is going on behind Kremlin walls. But Western experts think that they see persuasive evidence that Gromyko is now a dominant voice in Soviet policy toward the outside world.

After Leonid I. Brezhnev's death in late 1982, Gromyko moved to the front row of the Politburo seating chart. At the funeral of Yuri V. Andropov, Brezhnev's successor, the foreign minister actually spoke ahead of Dmitri F. Ustinov, the chief of the Soviet Union's military-industrial complex. Western political leaders noticed that during their recent meetings with party boss Konstantin U. Chernenko Gromyko did not hesitate to interrupt.

The rise of Gromyko's influence coincides with a period of Soviet bellicosity. The dour foreign minister is now seen as a preeminent hard-liner who is probably the chief architect of the Soviet Union's unbending stance of hostility toward the Reagan Administration and of inflexibility on arms-control issues.

As a U.S. intelligence official put it the other day, for years Gromyko has been a conduit for policies made by other people. Now, at last, he can make policy himself, but the results are not what we would like.

The West is still entitled to hope that a new generation of Soviet leaders will be more flexible, more amenable to peaceful albeit competitive coexistence. Unfortunately Gromyko's example suggests that exposure to the West alone is not a reliable harbinger of cooperative attitudes.